



The E-Mail Retention and Destruction Issue

E-mail's convenience and resulting pervasive use means that most organizations are maintaining large volumes of it, notwithstanding the legal issues mentioned above. This poses several problems:

- Even with the continuing drop in prices for electronic storage, continued storage of large volumes of e-mail imposes significant costs on an organization;
- The administrative issues of managing millions or billions of very informal data objects, generated with little or no attention to formal structuring or indexing, make systematic recovery of them challenging and expensive;

The e-mail so stored is subject to legal process, requiring searches that may prove very difficult and expensive. These issues have therefore made the question of e-mail retention one of the cutting-edge issues in information management and risk management. Two general philosophical approaches to dealing with it have emerged:

- **The blanket cut-off.** In this approach, all e-mail is retained for some period -- 60 days, 90 days, 1 year, etc. -- and then deleted *en mass*.
- **The e-mail-as-a-record approach.** In this approach, each e-mail is categorized by subject matter, and given a retention period based upon that subject matter, presumably the same one as other data objects containing similar subject matter.

Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. The blanket approach has the virtues of simplicity and ease of implementation, but assumes -- often incorrectly -- that e-mail is homogeneous from both business management and legal perspectives, and all e-mail can therefore be treated identically.

The e-mail-as-a-record approach has the virtues of precision and specificity; and of searchability -- e-mail is retained based upon its assessed value, and is (in theory) recoverable on demand, based upon the categorization given it. The disadvantage of this approach is that categorization of e-mail has proven to be a formidable challenge, to say the least.

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